

Minds in Motion

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THE DOCENT EDUCATOR

THE QUARTERLY JOURNAL FOR DEDICATED EDUCATORS



**More
Tough Topics**

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When Visitors Get It Wrong

It can be tough and tricky. You've ask visitors a question in order to get them involved and thinking, and then, one of them responds with an answer so "incongruous" that it nearly steals your breath away. What could that person be thinking of?

Or, perhaps someone responds to your question using terminology incorrectly. You know that you have to do or say something to set the record straight and get things back on track. But, *what* should you do?

Docents and staff educators need practical strategies for responding to visitors whose statements are obtuse, illogical, or wrong, because being "open and accommodating" doesn't always cut it. They need to know how to manage such situations without challenging, frustrating, or demeaning visitors, and without further complicating the topic under discussion.

Checking for Intended Meaning

Responding to "wrong" statements from visitors begins by fully comprehending this truism ... words derive their meaning from the person using them. Therefore, to focus on what *words* mean, rather than what *people* mean, obscures rather than clarifies understanding.

Thus, the first technique a docent should master is how to check for a person's *intended* meaning. A docent must consciously learn not to focus on the words that a person uses, but to assist that person in his attempt to express himself.

For instance, if someone looks at a J.M.W. Turner painting and incorrectly attaches the term "abstract" to it, do not thwart the

viewer by interjecting the "correct" definition of that term. Instead, help that person express what he is *trying* to say. Rather than test him by asking, "Do you know *the meaning* of the term 'abstract'?", ask, "What do *you* mean by the term 'abstract'?" Should he answer, for instance, "I mean the way the painting seems out of focus, blurry, and soft," you can respond to his correct observation rather than to his incorrect use of an art historical "label."

Sometimes, however, a person will respond to a request for intended meaning by misusing the word again. For instance, if that same visitor defines the word 'abstract' by saying, "I mean that the work is painted in an abstract style," you must be prepared to paraphrase or ask for an example.

Paraphrasing

The first technique for helping people clarify their remarks is to seek their intended meaning by asking "What do *you* mean?" A second way, which may be even more effective, is by paraphrasing.

Paraphrasing is the technique of telling a person what his statement means to you. Paraphrasing is not simply repeating the other person's statement in different terms. For instance, one would not reply to the statement, "This was a bad period in history," by saying, "By bad, do you mean unhappy?"

A paraphrase should, whenever possible, present two or more specific illustrations. Providing concrete illustrations forces the visitor to make a choice between alternatives and to narrow his definition.

So, the person who misused the term 'abstract' might be asked, "By 'abstract,' do you mean that the artist

shows us his brush strokes, or, do you mean that he leaves large areas of the scene undefined?" Then, the visitor can choose one of these alternatives, or respond with his own clarification, such as, "No, I mean that the painting appears to be out of focus, blurry, and soft."

An added benefit of paraphrasing is that it lets visitors know you are interested. It is evidence that you want to understand what is said. The skill of paraphrasing requires that a docent give two or more specific illustrations using words with commonly agreed upon definitions, and that the docent ask if the alternatives offered correlate to the meaning that was intended.

Therefore, if a visitor says, "This was a bad period in history," you might respond by saying, "By bad, do you mean that it was a time when many people worked as servants, or that it was a time when people had too many formal rules of behavior to follow?"

Asking for Examples

There are times when it is best to have a visitor clarify meaning by offering his own examples. Asking a visitor to give examples lets him know that you think clarification would be helpful, perhaps because you are not sure *you* understand what was meant, or because you believe thinking about possible examples will help everyone.

So, if someone touring your historic home says, "This was a bad period in history," you can follow-up by asking, "In what ways was it bad?" or "What factors make it seem bad to you?"

Asking for examples can be tricky, however. You wouldn't want

Cover Photo:
*The Powerhouse
Museum
in
Sydney, Australia
used humor
to defuse
the potentially
controversial
exhibition about
contraception entitled
"Taking Precautions."*
photo: Andrew Frolows,
Powerhouse Museum,
Sydney, Australia.

to challenge the visitor or place that person on the defensive. Asking a visitor, "Why did you say that?" or "What leads you to make that statement?" can make a visitor feel "under attack" for offering his thoughts or ideas, and does not lead toward clarification of the communication.

If a visitor on your tour says, "It was more fun to be an explorer in the old days," a proper request for examples might be, "Tell me some things explorers did in the old days that made it more fun." Then, that visitor could answer by saying, "Well, when Columbus landed in the Americas, he didn't know what he would find. But when the astronauts landed on the moon, they already knew a lot about it." If, on the other hand, you asked that visitor, "What do you mean by that?" the visitor could merely respond by saying that "In the old days, exploring was more exciting." This statement does not lead to a greater understanding (you still haven't learned why or how it was more fun to be an explorer in the old days), and therefore, does nothing to clarify his communication.

Re-Evaluating Your Questions

Docents and other educators who need to say "no" often, who must correct visitors frequently, or who find that their visitors do not seem to know answers, should re-evaluate their questions. Are the questions asked truly "open-ended," or do they simply sound open-ended?

Open-ended questions do not have presupposed responses. They can and will be answered in many different ways, and should reflect differences in individual experiences, backgrounds, and points-of-view. If you are a docent who frequently corrects visitors, or tells them "no," you are probably asking questions that test for information or recall. These are "closed-ended" questions,

which are useful in traditional classroom teaching, but are not appropriate for settings of informal learning, such as museums, historic sites, zoos, parks, and gardens.

When information ought to be transferred to visitors, it should not be accomplished by questioning. It should be told to them in declarative statements. In other words, provide people with information; don't ask them for it. You are the expert; they are not. The reason visitors are asked questions is to engage, excite, and involve them, not to test them.

If your questions are open-ended and you still find yourself stunned by visitors' answers, perhaps your questions are open-ended but your expectations for answers are not. Answers that throw us for a loop are often ones that are unexpected or that do not conform to our own ideas and experiences.

Remember and Consider

The purpose of asking questions when touring visitors is to get them involved, actively thinking, and

formulating their own ideas and insights. Being "open and accommodating" are important attitudes for docents to display, but knowing *how* to assist visitors when they attempt to express their ideas and insights takes more than having the right attitude. It even takes more than having an in-depth knowledge of subject matter. It takes knowing how to teach.

While there are those who assume that there is little more to teaching than having a firm grasp of subject matter, they are mistaken. Teaching is a skill of communication. In addition to understanding subject matter and the content of a collection, an effective museum educator (staff or volunteer) must know how to engage and encourage minds, while facilitating self-expression and learning.

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10 Red Flags for Historic House Museums

by
Jamie
Credle

Did you know there are more historic house museums than any other kind of museum in the United States? Of the approximately 8,000 museums in America there are over 3,000 historic properties. Most towns have at least one stately home open to the public. The common thread running through these institutions is "the tour." Docent-led tours are the primary method of experiencing historic house museums.

"The tour" constitutes the main interpretive scheme and is often the only interpretive program at historic properties. And, it is the docents/interpreters/guides to whom the vitality of our national heritage is entrusted through the tours they give. By helping to shape perceptions of the past, these tours can have a significant influence on the millions

of people who visit historic house museums each year.

Sometimes, however, these tours leave visitors more confused than enlightened. For a recent docent training session, the McFaddin-Ward House came up with "10 Red Flags," a list of common interpretive stumbling blocks. Docents need to be aware that these content concepts and strategies can cause confusion and sometimes consternation among the touring public. The intuitive docent should handle these issues with care.

1 *Frame of Reference.* There may be an event or person who is of monumental importance at a site, but who is completely unfamiliar to visitors. References to this person or event should begin with a brief orientation. An example from the

McFaddin-Ward House involves unintroduced references to "Spindletop." To southeast Texans, "Spindletop" is synonymous with the discovery of oil near Beaumont, Texas, in 1901, which launched the petroleum age in the Lone Star State. A visitor from Pennsylvania was dumbfounded by references to Spindletop. After the tour, she finally asked, "What is Spindletop?" To her, the oil industry began in Titusville, Pennsylvania!

2 *Flying Dates.* Throwing out too many dates and numbers will jumble the chronology the docent is trying to communicate. Every property can cite its own humorous examples of this problem. From the McFaddin-Ward House: "Moving into a new home at 1906 McFaddin Avenue in 1907 was 50-year-old W.P.H. McFaddin and his young family, including his 34-year-old wife Ida, 16 years his junior, and their three children, Mamie, Perry, and Caldwell, ages 11, 10, and 6."

3 *Genealogical Boondoggle.* Visitors cannot grasp the nuances of a family's genealogical tree in a one-hour tour, nor do they want to. Keeping the key players' names and descent in order is the best a docent can hope to do. It is helpful to have a copy of genealogical information and a family tree on hand to answer questions, but delving into generations will be beyond the tolerance of most visitors.

4 *What's in a Name?* Going hand-in-hand with the genealogical boondoggle is the problem of names. At many sites where family lineage is discussed, everyone seems



Historic homes constitute the largest number of museums in the United States, and most visitors experience these sites on docent-led tours.

photo: courtesy of the McFaddin-Ward House

to have the same name. At the McFaddin-Ward House there was an ancestor named William, who had a son William, who had a son William. Docents can avoid confusion about the Williams by keeping in mind the tour's main focus. Interpret the key people and mention the remainder only peripherally.

5 *Correct Address.* It is hard to know how to refer to the key players at a site. When visiting the McFaddin-Ward House in the early 20th century a guest would never have referred to Mr. and Mrs. W.P.H. McFaddin as Perry and Ida — their given names. They would have used the more formal titles of Mr. and Mrs. McFaddin. On tour, however, people who never knew the McFaddins refer to them as W.P.H. and Ida. At Monticello, Thomas Jefferson is referred to as Mr. Jefferson. It remains up to those at individual sites to determine what is appropriate.

6 *If it ain't Baroque.* Unless "the tour" is intended to focus on decorative arts, listing furnishings' cataloguing information is not necessary. If information about an object's style, manufacturer, or provenance does not relate to the story a docent is telling, it is extraneous.

7 *The Snooty Factor.* Because most historic houses once belonged to members of the social, cultural, or financial elite, tours can assume an air of haughtiness. On a recent tour of a grand home along the Mississippi River, the docent discussed "Sotheby's this and Christie's that." She left the shorts and tee-shirt clad guests feeling

shabby and plebeian. Good interpretation is not elitist. As a docent at the Shadows-on-the-Teche in Louisiana was once heard to say, "Now this is everybody's house."

8 *Title Search.* Many house museums have a variety of owners before being restored into educational institutions. The line of ownership can be confusing, as well as extremely interesting. Docents should acknowledge the lineage and briefly explain.

9 *Constructive-itis.* In trying to understand the history of a site, visitors deserve to know what sort of alterations have been made to a property. Drayton Hall in South Carolina is the rarest of the rare — a pristine architectural specimen. The rest of museum-dom must construct precise and concise word-pictures to inform visitors of the construction history of a site.

10 *What's Outside?* At some historic house museums, the outside is not acknowledged; the docent concentrates exclusively on the interior. Nevertheless, the overall architecture and the landscape are powerful pieces of an historic site's puzzle. The way a building is situated on land may be its reason for being. Discussion of the landscape — both now and then — is integral to understanding a site's history.



Interesting seventh graders in an historic house can be challenging. Knowing how to avoid several common touring errors, however, can keep your tour and their experience from becoming problematic.

photo: courtesy of the McFaddin-Ward House

For example, when built in 1906, the McFaddin-Ward House was near the western edge of Beaumont — almost in the country. Cows were kept off the property by a wooden fence. The city has long ago overtaken the area and now the house sits in a rapidly changing urban neighborhood. This information is relevant and provides a context within which the visitor can better understand the entire site.

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[Ms. Credle wishes to acknowledge Jessica Foy, curator at the McFaddin-Ward House, for providing "indispensible editorial comments and suggestions."]

Crossing Cultural Boundaries

by
Caroline
Hagan

Your audience is a small sea of upturned, eager faces with ancient eyes that bespeak an origin in some far away area of Southeast Asia, and your subject is Victorian English Sporting Prints. How can you excite this exotic assembly with such a seemingly irrelevant topic?

Here are some suggestions for communicating effectively across the many cultures that comprise our society:

1. *Be as open to your audience as you would like them to be open to you and your tour theme.* Take time to ask them some questions about themselves and then validate their opinions. This creates a "safe" and comfortable atmosphere in which the opportunity for personal exploration will be enhanced. Then, anticipate unexpected questions, comments, or reactions and be relaxed about them. Look for even subtle indications of their interest and invite their perceptions. Inform them that you are open to their suggestions (and, indeed, do be open) in the context of your presentation.

2. *Avoid assumptions and stereotypes.* Do not presume that Asian children will be quiet or that Hispanic teenage boys will subscribe to a philosophy of machismo. If you pick up reservations some of them have about you, demonstrate your sense of humor in defusing any misconceptions.

3. *Be personal in your approach.* Share a personal insight or story about yourself that allows your audience to identify with you while learning about the subject matter at hand. For instance, in a Planetarium presenta-

tion about the constellation, relate how you thought the constellation GEMINI meant "Gem in the eye" and searched the stars for such a representation.

4. *Demonstrate an interest in your audience's cultural heritage.* In the context of a presentation about dinosaurs, ask your audience if they know ancestral legends or lore about great beasts that inhabited the earth in olden times. Be a model of curiosity and be comfortable and humble with your ignorance of their heritage. Allow them to teach you. Challenge your audience to identify parallels or contrasts in your culture's approaches to the subject matter and cite these parallels or contrasts as valuable contributions to understanding.

5. *Place your subject matter in a cross-cultural reference by citing historical precedents or antecedents in another culture.* For example, when teaching with those Victorian English Sporting Prints mention that "these proper English gentlemen pictured playing polo learned this sport from Ancient India where the rajahs and chiefs bred beautiful ponies and started a game hitting a ball with a stick from the backs of their steeds."

6. *Don't be in a hurry or too business-like.* Leisurely learning is preferable to little learning. A rapport is critical to the process of teaching. Pat Rice, a teacher at Waimea Elementary School in Hawaii, points out that many Pacific Island cultures, among others, operate in a closely-knit, extended family style, and that members of these groups can be put off by briskness. What a Westerner may see as efficient dispatch can be

interpreted by these people as unfriendliness or even coldness.

7. *Use visual aids when possible.* Remember the ancient Chinese proverb, "One picture is worth 1,000 words." Showing your audience a picture may break through the language barrier far more effectively than a long or labored description might.

8. *Keep in mind that body language and non-verbal cues can be misleading.* Don't assume that all cultures "read" body language similarly. For instance excessive smiling can be interpreted differently than you mean. Making eye contact is taboo in some cultures. Read about the behaviors and attitudes of cultures you see on a repeated basis. Don't overdo Western-style graciousness in an attempt to make your audience comfortable — it may have the opposite effect!

CONTENT AND LANGUAGE

Tanya Dean, Director of the Institute of English Studies for the Hawaii Preparatory Academy Middle School on the Big Island of Hawaii, attended by many Pacific Rim students, addresses another area of concern in cross-cultural communication besides difficulties stemming from content and cultural differences — difficulties stemming from language (both verbal and non-verbal). If you are dealing with students who may not be fluent in your language, she advises:

- ▲ Speak clearly and slowly (without condescending).
- ▲ Tell your audience to ask questions or make comments, and give them the ground rules

for doing so, i.e. "Please raise your hand at any time if you don't understand or have a question."

- ▲ Tell your audience that you will be happy to slow down or rephrase a statement if they request it.
- ▲ Use repetition with a little difference each time in making important points.
- ▲ If possible, allow for one-on-one time. Group situations can be intimidating for anyone, and it may be especially so for students whose background and language are dissimilar.

We receive the opportunity for insightful, and often delightful, learning ourselves when we work with cultures different than our own. Cathy Anders, a teacher whose assignments once included a public high school in Tonga, marveled at the gender differences she encountered in

the matriarchal society (where leadership roles in the group were most likely to be assumed by females). Karen Thompson, Curator of Education at the Honolulu Academy of Arts, mentioned the culturally diverse conceptualizations docents deal with when they present Pacific Island arts to members of Pacific Island cultures who have no word for "art" as Westerners mean it. These objects are viewed by the Islanders as ritual in nature and/or, in all cases, as objects with a direct connection to their lives. Their frame of reference contrasts with the Western idea of art, in which an object may have no additional purpose other than self-expression.

The native people of New Ireland, an island in the nation of Papua New Guinea, create elaborate images of ancestor figures and clan totems for ceremonies that include funerary rituals, but discard these works after they have served their purpose. Polynesians, on the other hand, pass down their crafted object as family heirlooms (with the mana,

or spiritual energy, within the object increasing as each successive generation takes custodianship). Yet both of these societies do not view their "art" as social statements, personal statements, or thought-provoking catalysts (as Westerners might view such works as Andy Warhol's presentation of a soup can!).

So docents and others who teach can learn and be stimulated by their cross-cultural audiences' ideas, as they hope to share ideas with them. That's what makes our world go round! As Brian and Young Soo Brumsickle, a cross-cultural teaching couple, pointed out to me — showing interest in each other is what gives students a sense of belonging in this world. Ultimately, we should all be life-long students of the growing global community.

Caroline Hagan is a freelance writer and substitute teacher living in Kawaihai, Hawaii.

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Teaching in the Curatorial Wake

by
Claudia J.
Nicholson

We all tackle controversial art, objects, or subjects at our institutions, intentionally or unintentionally. In fact, entire exhibits have the potential to bring an institution to a screeching halt. As a curator, I may select the topic for the exhibit, devise an organizing principle, write labels that clearly explain to the visitor why we choose to exhibit these objects, and why they should pay attention to the objects and the subject. My job is more or less done when the exhibit opens.



This object caused quite a few "clutch" reactions among visitors to the South Dakota State Historical Society. It is actually a friendship quilt made in the "Four L's" pattern, representing life, love, luck, and light. Docents can place objects such as this in their proper context.
photo: Robert Travis for the S.D.H.S.

But you know how human beings are. They see something that offends them, and they clutch. They stop thinking at precisely the moment they ought to begin thinking, when they ought to be curious. As the curator who selected the objects and wrote the labels, I am now helpless to change that visitor's thinking. You, however, are not. Docents have the ability to create a positive experience for museum visitors out of a potentially negative one. Your job is to help the visitors find a way to "shed" their skin and try on someone else's. You lead them into the lives of the historical actors, and you can help them view the past on its own terms, in its own time and context. You can help them be the artist, scientist, or historian.

There are two types of reactions for which you need to watch. The emotional outburst is easy to spot and you should be able to use one of the techniques discussed ahead to deal with it. The silent reaction is much more difficult to catch, but equally important to address — I call it "the clutch." Sometimes, visitors will avert their eyes or turn their heads away from something that upsets them. Sometimes, they will clutch at their throats, chests, or clothing. When you notice that, it is your clue to discuss that particular object further. Do not put the uncomfortable visitor on the spot. Simply stop your group and say, "Let's talk about this object for a minute." If you are lucky, the offended person may open up, to the benefit of all.

It helps to remind visitors, particularly in history and science museums, that the past is not all sweetness and light, and that our understanding of science is not immutable. Museums talk about bad things, difficult times, new theories,

and tough topics precisely because they must. Museums help ensure that the past is not forgotten, that the public learns new theories, and that they broaden their horizons.

One of your jobs is to relate the tough topic to the visitor's experiences. Sometimes, that work is done for you. At the Capital Children's Museum in Washington, DC, an exhibit about the Holocaust called "Remember the Children" used a simple device to help young visitors comprehend the numbers of children who had perished. A huge wall case filled to the top with one million ping pong balls gave the children a sense of the vastness of one million. It was an effective device for adult visitors, too. If the curatorial staff has not done this type of thing for you, find your own examples to help visitors relate their life experience to the topic being presented. We all understand an abstract concept better if we can relate it to a concrete one or to similar experience in our own lives.

Humor can help take the edge off. You must use it carefully, however, and with tact and discretion. The Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, Australia, used humor to defuse potential controversy in an exhibit about contraception entitled "Taking Precautions." The exhibit opens with a compilation of sex education films from the 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s, that through their absurdity and dated-ness, open the visitor's mind to an otherwise taboo topic. A reviewer commented about this exhibit: "It's just right; humour mediates embarrassment and opens a path for visitors to talk about the topic." Indeed, humor was designed into the exhibit. Megan Hicks, one of the exhibit's curators, explained that among the aims of the exhibition was "to share the jokes on the subject"



The Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, Australia, tackled the ultimate in tough topics – birth control – in its exhibit “Taking Precautions.” In this section of the exhibit, dealing with condoms, the exhibit team went so far as to display some condoms as if they were being used. The humor that was incorporated into the exhibit helped to loosen visitors up enough to enable them to contemplate this serious subject.

photo: Andrew Frolows, Powerhouse Museum

of birth control. “It would have been easy for this exhibition to have been just an array of gizmos and gadgets in glass cases. Instead, it became a human look at an important but difficult topic.” Though it may be natural for visitors to joke about certain tough topics, it helps if the museum and staff can direct that joking to some purpose — like opening the visitor’s mind to the subject.

Many members of the general public mistakenly equate public exhibition with approbation. The reaction to a Ku Klux Klan robe with indisputable ties to South Dakota is typical. “Why do you choose to glorify this dark chapter in history?” Docents can help visitors see that history’s dark moments need to be understood, too. The Klan robe presented an opportunity to explain the Klan’s enmity toward Catholics, Jews, and foreigners, as well as Blacks. This would be a good instance in which restating the information on the label might help visitors to get

over the shock of seeing a Klan robe in such a surprising place.

Museums sometimes try to be subtle; however, unstated points and subtle humor (or irony) are usually lost on the visitor. A poster exhibit developed by the National Archives presented documentary evidence of the Holocaust. In its first edition, the last document was a transcript of a speech by Heinrich Himmler saying in part, “... this glorious chapter of German history, unknown and perhaps never to be known ...” The exhibit’s curators believed that the presence of the document in the National Archives of the United States belied Himmler’s statement — and of course it did. However, the new edition of the exhibit states flat out that Himmler was wrong — and it showed photographs of survivors to prove it. It is not enough to assume that visitors will infer the point. You must state it. Be direct.

Museums must take a point of view and present it without equivocation. In 1987, the National Archives

opened its constitutional bicentennial exhibit, “The American Experiment: Living with the Constitution.” Among the topics discussed were the war powers of the President. Under this section the Archives looked at the relocation of citizens of Japanese descent during World War II. The centerpiece of this section was a painfully ironic 1943 government film that glossed over the reasons for, and effects of, the relocation and described the internees as something akin to happy kibbutzniks, out to “make the desert bloom.”

The staff of the National Archives did not feel they needed to say more. They believed that the irony of the film would be obvious to all. It was not. People on guided tours were offered the irony, while self-guided visitors were not. Docents asked, “Does this film sound like propaganda to you, or do you think the U.S. Government believed what it was saying here?” Unfortunately, the vast majority of visitors to the National Archives are self-guided.

(Continued on the next page.)

Teaching in the Curatorial Wake

(Continued from previous page.)

So after complaints and a threat of Congressional action, Archives staff strengthened the label and pointed out what visitors had missed. As docents, you can do that, too.

If the curators have not done it for you already, you must also show the visitor how the curators made their interpretation. History museums, for instance, have done little to disclose the historical method. You can help visitors understand how historians do their work and how they reach the conclusions that your museum is presenting to the visitors. Art museums, likewise, often do not let visitors know why they value certain works of art. The average visitor may have difficulty evaluating modern art, for instance. You are the link between the museum curators and the visitor. You can explain to visitors why the museum considers a work of art worthy to exhibit, or you can give visitors the tools to evaluate the work of art themselves. Encourage your visitors to look at the evidence or evaluation criteria with a critical eye. Encourage them to disagree with the museum's conclusions.

If you have done all you can to help the visitor understand the museum's point-of-view about a controversial topic, and still the visitor is upset or hostile, then you need to allow the visitor to vent his feelings. In some museums, staff provide a variety of means for the visitors to "talk back." The Chicago Children's Museum, for example, provides talk back boards, logs, or journals for visitors to express their feelings. The talk back boards extend the interpretation of the exhibit onto another plane — visitor comments add points-of-view

and provoke more thought or response on the part of the visitors. If your museum does not offer such types of feedback mechanisms, then the visitor should be offered paper, pencil, and a quiet place to sit, think, and write a response to the museum. Exhibit teams do want to hear negative comments, since such comments can lead to a strengthened exhibit. If labels, for instance, are not specific or useful, changes in the current exhibit can be made. Also, exhibit teams take previous comments into consideration when planning new exhibits.

If docents don't meet regularly with the exhibit planning teams, they should find a way to do so. As frontliners working with visitors, you are in the best position to know which exhibit techniques are working, and which are not. In institutions that do not use exhibit evaluation, exhibit teams often act on what they believe is best current professional practice,

and they usually have limited front-line experience with visitors. You have valuable information for the exhibit teams that you should share. When dealing with tough topics, your information about visitor reactions can help your institution avoid needless negative press and controversy, and lead to a better learning experience for visitors.

Claudia J. Nicholson is Curator of Collections for the South Dakota State Historical Society located in Pierre, South Dakota. She received her B.A. in history from Mary Washington College and an M.A. in History Museum Studies from the Cooperstown Graduate Program. Ms. Nicholson contributed a previous article to The Docent Educator (Spring 1996), entitled "Just a Little Respect."

THE NATIONAL DOCENT SYMPOSIUM

Docents at the Seattle Art Museum are hosting the 9th National Docent Symposium taking place on April 10-12, 1997, in Seattle, Washington.

"Under One Umbrella" is the theme of this year's symposium, reflecting the variety of institutions that are represented in Seattle. The hosts anticipate an attendance of approximately 500 docents, who will have the opportunity to share in a lively exchange of ideas and information with a new format that will permit all delegates to attend all sessions.

The National Docent Symposium takes place every other year. The 1999 symposium will be hosted by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Following that, the first National Docent Symposium of the new millenium will take place at the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas, in 2001.

F.Y.C.

For Your Consideration

Counter-evolutionary

In a 1983, *Nova*, the popular science series shown on the Public Broadcasting Service, aired a documentary called *The Miracle of Life*. The Emmy Award-winning film begins with a brief explanation of the origin of life on Earth. The narrator states, "Four and a half billion years ago, the young planet Earth was a mass of cosmic dust particles. It was almost completely engulfed by the shallow primordial seas. Powerful winds gathered random molecules from the atmosphere. Some were deposited in the seas. Tides and currents swept the molecules together. And somewhere in this ancient ocean, the miracle of life began."

As the camera moves underwater, the narrator continues, "The first organized form of primitive life was a tiny protozoan. Millions of protozoa populated the ancient seas. These early organisms were completely self-sufficient in their seawater world. They moved about their aquatic environment feeding on bacteria and other organisms From these one-celled organisms evolved all life on Earth. And the foundation of life, the cell, has endured unchanged since the first tiny organisms swam in the cradle of life, the sea."

When this program was presented in a high school science class in Jefferson County, Colorado, a 15-year-old, straight-A student named Danny Phillips was stunned. He believed the Bible is the absolute word of God. He does not believe in evolution and decided to fight back.

Danny filled out a district form titled "Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of Learning/Human Resources." In it, he explained that the film, along with a textbook called *Biological Science: An Ecological Approach*, was in conflict with his own beliefs because it taught evolution as a fact, not as a theory.

No matter that the Supreme Court, in two landmark cases, seemed to have resolved the matter. In 1968, in *Epperson vs. Arkansas*, the high court struck down an Arkansas law banning the teaching of evolution. And, in 1982, the court struck down a Louisiana law that required that schools teaching evolution must grant equal time to the theory of "creation science."

Danny Phillips' complaint to the district about the videotape and textbook was passed on to a six-member curriculum review panel, made up of teachers, administrators, and citizens. They found that "the introductory comments in the video are poorly stated and scientifically refutable. The statements assume a factual rather than a theoretical basis." The panel recommended three possible solutions: Instruct teachers to show the video without the introductory comments; ask the video's producer to supply a modified version; or select an alternative video on human reproduction. As for the textbook, the panel rejected Danny's request that *Biological Science: An Ecological Approach* be withdrawn.

Danny had won a partial victory. "Basically," he stated when interviewed, "I would like the schools to teach the theory of evolution as a theory. Treat it as they do science and present the evidence for and against it. Otherwise, the school is

in essence censoring half of the information."

Though the majority of teachers in Danny's school system supported use of the videotape without any censorship, the definitive response to this issue came from Joseph McNerney. McNerney is the director of the nonprofit *Biological Sciences Curriculum Study*, which back in the early 1960s almost single-handedly reintroduced evolution to the nation's biology textbooks. McNerney wrote, in a column published in *The Jefferson Sentinel*, a weekly newspaper in Lakewood, Colorado, that, "A theory is not an ephemeral guess. It is a powerful conceptual framework that is supported by overwhelming evidence that explains numerous observations about the natural world and that helps predict future observations. Yes, it's 'only a theory,' but so is gravitation. So is germ theory. So is the chromosome theory of inheritance. They're all theories. But we don't see anyone challenging these being taught as theories. Evolution is as widely accepted a theory in science as any of the others. The only reason that anybody challenges this is because it conflicts with people's religious views.

"Second," his column continued, "the party line claims that 'it's only fair to present both sides of the debate.' That is a plea to democracy that ignores the fact that creationism has no scientific basis and therefore cannot occupy any side in a scientific debate.

"The creationists maintain that 'scientists disagree about evolution,'" McNerney continued. "That is a deliberate misrepresentation of biology. In fact, all scientists accept the reality of evolution, [although] they continue to debate the process by which it occurs."

This article was excerpted from an article by David Hill appearing in the November/December 1996 issue of Teacher Magazine.

TEENAGERS!!!

One Tough Audience

by
Jean
Linsner

Like thousands of others, I arrived well before the museum doors opened and stood in line waiting to be admitted to the Claude Monet exhibition at the Art Institute. I'd picked a gorgeous day -- blue sky, low smog, sun rising over the lake. With latté in hand, I braced for what turned out to be a not-so-terrible wait. I passed the time watching a group of teens ahead of me in line.

There were about twenty students. They looked like sophomores or juniors. Like me, some enjoyed their breakfast of choice as they waited. In their case, a can of Dr. Pepper and an iced cake donut with sprinkles. They pushed and jostled each other, they teased and joked, their voices carried well above the morning rush traffic on Michigan Avenue. More of them preferred to sit on the sidewalk than stand in line. They averaged two visible pierced holes per student, and urban grunge best describes their fashion sense.

I marveled at their goofiness. What a mixture of self-confidence and self-consciousness wrapped up in low-slung baggy jeans and flannel. At first, I wondered if I was ever like them. Then I wondered if this loud, raucous group would (hopefully) rush through the exhibition galleries quickly enough so I could commune with Monet in relative peace.

Even though I had spent the better part of my professional life working with youth in informal settings, I found myself hoping I wouldn't have to share these teens' exuberance on my busman's holiday. Was I a hypocrite?

When I'm being more generous, I forgive my brief episode of selfish-

ness, saying that I had waited a long time to see the exhibition, I'd awakened extra early to ensure a good spot in line, and I *deserved* to have the best museum experience possible. My less generous, niggling self ends up responding with a comeback like, "well, didn't the teens *deserve* the best museum experience possible, too?"

Every guest at every museum, zoo, historic house, botanical garden, conservatory, and science center deserves the best, most satisfying, enriching, and inspirational visit possible. The problem is, that which defines a quality experience is different for different people.

What defines a quality experience for teenagers? It's hard to say. Most of us don't see enough teens at our institutions to accumulate even enough anecdotal information to influence programming and policies. And, even if we do host a fair number of teens, it's just not cost effective to put a lot of resources behind programs when we know we can get a bigger bang for our institutional buck if we program for families with children under age twelve, affluent young professionals, and grandparents.

And since many institutions offer curriculum-linked programming just through 6th grade, we often only have a general tour to offer teen visitors. But even that's easier said than done, because many docents prefer not to work with junior high and high school students.

One Tough Audience

What makes some docents uncomfortable about working with teens? Well, for starters, teens are bigger, stronger, and louder than other school-aged kids. They know

more (maybe than you), they show off, they sulk, they're irreverent, silly, over-sexed, easily hurt, and easily tired. They're shy, full of bravado, and full of beans. They're hungry all the time for everything; they're discovering their own interests; they're learning their own moral code. They're introspective. They're flamboyant. They pay more attention to their peers than their parents (or any adult, for that matter). They seem out to push our buttons. They're developing a sense of their power and their powerlessness. They talk funny. They're not fully formed like adults and yet they're not controllable like children.

Not controllable. That seems to be a key factor in why some docents prefer not to work with teens. Why waste your breath talking when no one is paying attention?

But, I believe that, for the most part, most teens are paying attention. It's just that paying attention for teens looks different than when younger children or adults pay attention. Young children will show they're paying attention with enthusiastic cries and cheers or rapt silence. For teens, paying attention usually manifests itself somewhere along the behavioral spectrum ranging from jostling, teasing, and noise-making at one end to brooding, introspection, and distant regard at the other.

In any case, teens are not an easy audience. They make our job of developing and presenting programming for informal settings pretty challenging. As educators, we need to figure out ways to tap into the angst and energy of teens so our teaching becomes relevant, provocative, and enjoyable for this bypassed audience.

Sphere of Influence

As docents, we can influence programs and policy matters at our institutions indirectly through our supervisors or volunteer councils and directly by developing ways to reach out to teens.

Before developing or altering programming for teens, host one or several informal brown bag lunch discussions to get a feel for unpaid and paid staff attitudes and knowledge about teens in general and about those who live in your community. Spend time discussing your programming strengths and weaknesses concerning teens. Brainstorm some possible programming ideas. You might invite a high school or junior high counselor, coach, or teacher to get the discussion rolling. You might also consider inviting some teens to a discussion to give you feedback.

Customize Programming

Are you reaching out to teens in any special ways? Has there been an attempt to make programming more meaningful and relevant to your teenage constituency?

Career Connections: Teens are being required to make life decisions about college and career choices. Are there ways to incorporate a career connection piece into your pre-existing programs? For example, could tours be redesigned to include a brief segment introducing teens to museum professions and the educational paths leading to these positions? Can a tour be created that examines the careers of the artists, historians, scientists, or other professionals represented in your institutional collections?

Service, Please: Many colleges, high schools, and junior highs are requiring students to complete a certain number of service project

volunteer hours as a requirement for graduation. As this trend continues, more and more volunteer organizations are caught scrambling to throw something together when they get the call from a student on Friday saying that he needs to volunteer 50 service hours by Monday.

Rather than piecing together some make-do job or, worse, being unresponsive to these calls, institutions can prepare for this trend by actively developing meaningful service project jobs in collaboration with area schools, churches, youth and Scout groups. Is there any portion of a pre-existing volunteer job that could be tailored to meet the specific needs of a service requirement for the students at a nearby school?

Interacting with Teens

A few years ago, a study documented the fact that students do remember salient aspects of their school field trips years after the last museum shop souvenir is gone. Unfortunately, what students remember wasn't always what their instructors had intended. Nonetheless, the take home message is kids do remember field trips and docents have the ability to help make those memories positive and meaningful through quality interactions with students.

If you're new to working with teens, remember that teens do react and interact much differently than a group of adults or a group of third graders would. They may be loud or they may remain silent, but either way, trust that some of what you do and say will reach some of the group some of the time.

From the start, set clear limits of what you expect from the students. Include how you want to be addressed, where food and beverages

can be enjoyed, any house rules, and any other information they need to know in order to be able to enjoy your facility. Make sure they know you expect active learners.

Create an atmosphere for learning. Ask good questions, not silly ones. Ask for help pronouncing names that are unfamiliar to you. Think through the examples and anecdotes you use so you can be certain each one is inclusive. Remember, teens sense fear. You can avoid being nervous by being well prepared for the group. (It's not a dress rehearsal!) Also, no matter how technically advanced your group is, you will undoubtedly know more about the institution than anyone else. Share that! It's okay for others to know more than you do about certain things. Allow them to share their information. After all, your role is that of facilitator, not autocrat.

Show teens you respect them. Most teens hate it when adults try to be their buddies or force being funny. Being your best, warm, professional self is what teens will respond to. If at all possible, let teens self-select their small groups. Most students find interactive learning more enjoyable than passive learning, but don't force the issue. And, if you use any type of worksheet, be certain it is meaningful (leading to insights and/or discoveries) and not just busy work.

Teens look to their peers for approval, so risk taking is not one of their strong suits. Reward all questions and answers by demonstrating your interest and taking them seriously. That's not to say you reward wrong answers, but you do need to reward the fact that the teen took a chance.

You can help by wording questions so that you don't unwittingly back a teen into a corner.

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back page.

The More the Merrier?

by
Ellen Henry
and
Trish Pfeifer

Twenty or less. Docents and educators across the country consider this the optimum size for school group tours in museums. That's why we were both excited and a little nervous when the Education Department of the Chrysler Museum of Art invited us to craft and conduct tours for groups of 60-80 sixth graders who would be visiting an exhibition of Pueblo pottery on loan from the Cincinnati Art Museum. Approximately 2,000 students from the Hampton, Virginia, public schools would be visiting, and this would be the perfect opportunity for us to test the theory that if 15-20 children can have a great experience in the galleries, why not 80?!

On our initial visit to the exhibit, entitled *Singing the Clay*, we saw four large, connecting gallery spaces filled with long, low pedestals holding more than 100 exquisite (and unprotected) Pueblo pots. The absence of barriers made the pottery temptingly accessible to both eyes and hands. The pottery from the various Pueblos all looked alike at first glance, and the presentation was very stark for an audience used to a high degree of sensory stimulation. How could we teach about the pottery, create a fun and exciting hour for 80 different learners, and keep all those wonderful clay objects safe?

From the beginning we kept in mind Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and the PROJECT MUSE work being done at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, which applies learning theory to museum education.

Depending on which intelligences dominate a student's learning, one or more of these five entry points to knowledge is preferred:

- Aesthetic – responding to the formal, sensory qualities of the object or subject
- Narrative – interest in the subject or story being told
- Logical/Quantitative – deductive reasoning and numerical considerations
- Foundational – underlying philosophies, consideration of why the subject or object has importance
- Experiential – preference for learning by doing, using hands and bodies to learn.

Keeping in mind these ways of approaching any subject, including pottery, we decided that our first gallery activity would be both experiential and calming, as eighty students right off the bus would need to settle down. As our student visitors entered the gallery, they were greeted by the soothing sounds of traditional Native American flute music. Students sat on the floor in the exhibit's central gallery, relaxed, and were invited on an imaginary journey to the Acoma Pueblo to observe the climate, the people, the pueblo architecture, and the methods

of gathering and processing clay.

After this introduction, we tried our boldest experiment — allowing 80 students to work on their own with a treasure hunt activity. We really were not sure if this would invite total chaos or total involvement, but we knew that if the treasure hunt clues covered each entry point to knowledge, we had a good chance of getting everyone involved. (The museum's guards had been briefed ahead of time and were braced and ready just in case we were wrong!)

One of the most gratifying moments of our tour would usually come at the announcement of the treasure hunt, which was invariably greeted with a ripple of approval. Students always appreciate a chance to work on their own and to socialize with their classmates. The treasure hunt included factual questions such as “find the deer-in-his-house design” to imaginative and open-ended ones such as “find a design that is like fast, loud music.” Formal qualities of the objects were addressed, questions about the stories told by pottery symbols were asked, speculations about design and construction were encouraged.



This photo says it all!

photo: Scott Wolff, The Chrysler Museum



The absence of barriers and large numbers of objects made the pottery displayed temptingly accessible to both eyes and hands. The challenge was to create a fun and exciting program for 80 different learners, while keeping all the objects safe.

photo: Scott Wolff, The Chrysler Museum

About 20 minutes of the hour-long visit were allotted to this activity. As the students worked, we circulated among them, giving them more facts about the objects and asking them to spread this information to their friends. This approach worked wonderfully, and students quickly got caught up in teaching and helping each other. They also got caught up in competing with each other for the best answers. The treasure hunt handouts ended with a final item that invited students to invent two clues of their own and swap these with a friend. Every group tried to outdo the next with imaginative and difficult clues. Except for the occasional need to ask students not to run from one area of the gallery to another, or to not get too close to the pedestals, we had no discipline problems. They were just too

interested in the task to get into trouble! On days when we were unable to work together and no docents were available, we discovered that one tour guide and one guard could handle the group.

After reassembling the class, we spent a little time having individual students try to stump the group with their clues. This was a big hit, and when we would run out of time to hear everyone's clues, the students did not hesitate to express their disappointment.

The treasure hunt was followed by a drawing activity. We told students that the Pueblo Council would be looking for pottery designers who could combine symbols for corn, rain, earth, and sky in an original pottery design. We passed out forms with this "help wanted" ad at the top and with a large space for

a drawing of the design. Students were asked to make a sketch as well as write about the meaning of their symbols and design. By this time, most of the class were so involved that they almost believed this was a real job application. As they worked, we again circulated among them, making comments about their designs and telling them more about the pottery-making process. We had samples of unfinished works they could touch, and we asked them to make a comparison between some cheap imitation pots and the museum objects. The ultimate highlight of our discussion was, however, the recounting of how an oxygen-reduction fire is used to create the unique black pottery at Santa Clara and San Ildefonso Pueblos. When the pottery has baked long enough, the fire is smothered with horse manure.

The More the Merrier?

Continued from
previous page.

We just could not resist being the first educators to pass around baggies full of horse manure in the Chrysler Museum of Art, and you can be sure the student responded to this innovation!

By the time the drawing was completed our hour in the exhibition would be up. For the last few minutes we recapped the tour by asking students to tell us at least three things they had learned about the pottery. We answered any final questions and made certain that students took their finished drawings and treasure hunts back to school for use during classroom discussions. Teachers were given a classroom follow-up activity which would involve students in designing one more pot, this time with symbols to represent their school. The teachers also received a follow-up packet with information about Pueblo food, games, music, and dance traditions.

From our observations and questioning during the hour, we became convinced that the majority of our visitors were having a genuine flow experience. Rather than being short-changed by the size of the group, almost every student had our individual attention at some point during the tour. An interesting group dynamic developed, also, with every tour. Because there were so many students, people who wanted to participate far outnumbered those who were reluctant. The peer pressure to learn was overwhelming, and even the "coolest" were induced to get involved. In smaller groups we've observed that there is a much greater opportunity for the reluctant to prevail and dampen the spirits of everyone else. Thanks to the willingness of the museum's staff to allow such large groups to use these interactive strategies, we were able to demonstrate that sometimes more really is better!

▲
Ellen Henry and Trish Pfeifer are museum consultants currently working with the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia. A previous article co-authored by Ms. Henry and Ms. Pfeifer, entitled "Designing an Outreach Program," appeared in the Autumn 1996 issue of The Docent Educator.

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For further information write *The Docent Educator*, or call us at (808) 885-7728.

Easing the Anxiety

When the Dayton Art Institute announced in 1995 that its galleries would be closing for an 18 month period to accommodate an ambitious renovation and expansion, docents and teachers alike wondered what would happen to this worthwhile experience. What could have been a problem became a wonderful opportunity for our institution to "pack up" our galleries and take them to the schools! In January, 1996, The Dayton Art Institute introduced *Galleries on the Go* to the community. Six thematic programs, based on works of art from our permanent collection, were made available for presentations in 1st through 6th grade classrooms.

Galleries on the Go "kits" consist of large plastic tubs filled with props, pictures, and hands-on materials, along with portfolios of full-color, poster-size images of the works from the museum's collection. Docents with as much as 25 years experience touring in the galleries accepted the challenge of conducting outreach head on, but with understandable reservations.

"How will I know where to go?" "Will it be safe?" "Will there be an easel available?" These were just a few of the many questions asked as docents anticipated this major change in logistics. Wanting docents to concentrate on creating meaningful experiences for students in the classroom, and not on these annoying yet unavoidable logistical issues, we created a series of questions for docents to ask the school contact. Questions that, if answered in full, should alleviate much of the anxiety created by going somewhere new and different, and that would allow docents to focus on what they do best.

After culling the docents' questions and concerns, and adding a few of our own, we developed the following checklist. A brief conversation between docents and classroom teacher answers most or all of these and can relieve much of the stress involved in teaching in a new environment.

- ✓ What time are we expected to begin and conclude?
- ✓ How do I get to the school?
- ✓ Where should I park; how do I find the school office, and who will meet me in the school office?
- ✓ How many students will be attending?
- ✓ Will there be any students with special needs attending the presentation?
- ✓ Can you describe the physical layout of the room? Are the students at desks, at tables, in a circle, or in rows? Is there a chalkboard in the front that can be used?

Be sure to mention any special requests or needs that you (the docent) may have, such as an area on the floor to sit, a chalkboard, or an easel for instance.

In addition, several scheduling guidelines were created to ease the stress and guarantee maximum success for the new, logistical dilemma.

Teachers are requested to remain in the classroom. We have found that having the teacher in the room allows them the opportunity to enjoy the presentation, while relieving the docent of dealing with discipline issues that may arise.

Each of our six thematic topics has 3 identical "kits." Each topic is assigned only 3 times a week, eliminating the need to "juggle" kits.

Outreach kits can be picked up at any time, but are always returned by Friday afternoon. This allows them to be restocked by a group of volunteers and recirculated the following week.

Docents are scheduled in pairs. The idea of "safety in numbers" reassured the docents of always having someone there with them. While leading the presentation as a team created new issues for us to grapple with, the benefits have far outweighed any potential consequences.

Docents are categorized by their home location. In addition to selecting a day of the week for their volunteer service, docents were designated as either "North" or "South." We try to assign docents to schools within their designated vicinity.

Each of these suggestions was created to ease the anxiety of making the tough transition from touring in galleries to presenting outreach programming in classrooms. While the content of the presentations is familiar, the process of "packing up and hitting the road" can be scary. The docents response to *Galleries on the Go* has been tremendous, though. Serving over 1,000 students in our first few months, docents experienced genuine pleasure by conquering this new project and expanding our horizons!

Deena M. Pinales is the assistant curator of education for docent and teacher services at The Dayton Art Institute in Dayton, OH. Ms. Pinales received both her B.A. in Art History and her M.A. in Art Education from the University of Cincinnati. She also holds a K-12 teaching certificate in the visual arts.

by
Deena M.
Pinales

It's a Jungle Out There!

Tactful Tips for Taming Troublesome Teachers

Though some of you actually do work in zoos and nature centers, the rest of us occasionally encounter some real animals, too. While most teachers, group leaders, and classroom chaperones are delightful people eager to help share the wonders of your institution with their charges, from time to time a few of them become a bit "beastly."

The Lioness. The lioness-like teacher is very protective of her children and her authority. Fearing that talkative children, or children who give "incorrect" answers, will reflect badly on her teaching, she may have given the class instructions that inhibit your ability to give an interactive tour. Some teachers still expect learning to take place in absolute silence, and they may be uncomfortable with your open-ended questions and freer environment.

Loosening the lioness's hold over your tour group isn't easy. However, clearly stating your expectations at the beginning of the tour goes a long way toward enlisting her approval. For example, you might say, "While you're here today, we'll be looking at a lot of different things. I'll tell you about some of them, but most of the time I'll be asking you to tell me what you think. There won't be any wrong answers because you'll be giving me your opinions. You don't need to raise your hands, because I'm going to call on all of you. Just remember to talk quietly so we can hear your answer. Does that sound okay, Mrs. Leo?"

During the tour, you may want to thank Mrs. Leo for allowing her children to get out of her strict classroom mode. Asking her opinion or having her explain how a particular part of the tour relates to something from the classroom draws her in and makes her a partner in your endeavor. Of course, you must

keep the children so interested in what you're doing that they don't really misbehave. Don't let your inattention allow a child to do something for which he may be reprimanded when he returns to school.

A lioness will also protect her children from an incompetent or ineffective docent. If she finds that you are unprepared or unprofessional in your treatment of her students, she will certainly pounce. Your best chance with this kind of teacher is to be thoroughly prepared, and to provide an effective presentation of a developmentally-appropriate tour.

The Elephant. Just like an elephant's charge, some teachers stampede into your institution and take over. They answer all your questions, including those intended for the children. They rearrange your planned tour, taking a topic or even the tour itself off in another direction.

While it's impossible to stop a really determined elephant, there are some tips that can deflect them! When you ask a question, for instance, in that split second before the teacher answers, say with a smile, "No coaching from the audience, now Mrs. Proboscides." Your questions also can be given back to the children by pre-assigning them. Before you ask a question, say, "I'd like this group (or this particular child) to think of an answer to my next question."

Flexibility is always a valuable docent skill, but with an elephant in your midst it's an absolute necessity. If Mrs. Proboscides charges off in another direction, you have no choice but to follow ... at least for the moment. As soon as possible, you should try and guide her back to the main trail. Sometimes simply reminding ("We had discussed taking the children to see that room. Would

you rather substitute this room?") will get the group back on track. Occasionally, however, you must abandon your original design and bow to the inevitable.

It's possible, of course, that the teacher has taken over because a docent was going in the wrong direction. Teachers work within strict time allotments, and verbose docents can play havoc with their schedule. A brief confirmation of the time the class must leave the museum made at the beginning of the tour helps both teacher and docent relax.

The Sloth. It's easy to think of a certain type of teacher as a sloth. She doesn't have the latest research on your subject; she mispronounces common terms in your field; she insists on repeating the old-wives-tale information about your museum. Because she has the facts wrong, it's obvious that she's as lazy as a sloth!

Of course, sloths aren't really lazy (they just have an extremely low body temperature), and teachers whose knowledge is incomplete aren't either. Teachers in elementary school, where the majority of museum tour groups are spawned, are generalists in academics. Their specialty is "children." Their college coursework in the content areas, even for master's degree teachers, is broad based. In most cases, an elementary teacher's current information about any subject comes from the textbooks used in her classroom; and many of those textbooks (particularly in science and social studies) are out-of-date before they are printed. Providing teachers with current information about your subject prior to the tour serves both you and the teacher.

It is helpful to know what is begin taught the children who come to your museum, and this is usually an easy matter to determine. Many school systems have a central office

or resource center where copies of the adopted textbooks are available to public scrutiny. Additionally, copies of the state-mandated curricula can be obtained from the Department of Education in your state capital. If you find out-dated content or factual omissions in these materials in your area of specialization, you should not be surprised to find teachers who also make errors.

It's important, also, to make certain you aren't the sloth! Docents who take "shortcuts" in their research and continuing education, or who consistently recite the same tour year after year soon begin to blend into the background, growing algae on their fur and becoming slower and slower until they finally drop off their branch. Their tours are completely ineffective, and the museum is relieved when they decide to no longer volunteer.

Chimpanzees. You may encounter excellent teachers who, nevertheless, enter your museum accompanied by a group of chimpanzee chaperones. Although they have been given specific roles to play in the class field trip — namely the supervision of a small group of children — chimpanzee chaperones chatter

among themselves and totally ignore the children they're supposed to supervise. They quickly forget their assigned job and run off in all directions. In some cases, this may be a blessing in disguise as a chimpanzee does not make a good tour participant! If you can handle the group without their "help," it's better to let them go. If fact, sometimes you may want to suggest that the chaperones look around the museum on their own, arranging a time and place to rejoin the class group. By the way, you don't need to point out to the teacher that she has brought chimpanzees along; she already knows it!

It's possible that the chimpanzee problem will take care of itself. I once watched helplessly as one of the mothers accompanying a Girl Scout group to my museum took over as her child tried to make the simple yarn doll we were constructing. At the end of the activity, when I asked the girls to name their dolls, the child sweetly handed her doll to her mother and said, "You name her, Mother. You made her."

Most difficulties with teachers and other group leaders can be headed off with careful preliminary

preparation. Clear understanding of a teacher's expectations for a tour — and clear communication of your expectations — can be established with a pre-visit phone call. Keeping a card file or computer data base on the teachers who regularly visit your museum is also helpful. Past problems can then be discussed with the teacher prior to the next visit.

The bottom line, however, brings to mind an old business adage. Rule Number One: *The Customer is Always Right.* Rule Number Two: *When in Doubt, Refer to Rule Number One.* No matter how unpleasant a teacher or group leader may be, you cannot afford to make yourself look good at her expense. The teacher has the responsibility of her class for a much longer time than you will have them. Undermining her authority isn't fair, and the short-term gains you may make for yourself aren't worth the damage you do to the teacher, the class, and your institution. And, besides, most of the teachers you will encounter are the warm, fuzzy type — that's why you enjoy your job so much!

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

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Teenagers!!! One Tough Audience

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For example, you are standing in a gallery and ask your group, "When was this painting painted?" That kind of question backs people into a corner -- either they know the answer or they don't. However, you can rephrase the question to free up thinking and discussion by asking, "What do you notice about the painting that might give you some clues as to when it was painted?"

Final Thoughts

It used to be that we could take for granted that people found museums and other related institutions to be important and therefore worthy of their time and money. We can't take that for granted anymore. We need to cultivate relationships with our changing constituencies in order for them to discover the relevance, the splendor, and the magic we offer.

Teens are an audience worth cultivating. But, we must be assertive in our efforts as teens stop coming to our facilities when their lives become filled with so many other competing activities (as evidenced by the fact that family memberships drop off precipitously once kids hit that magic age of twelve).

Once they're young adults, we try to lure this group (and their disposable incomes) back through our doors with the promise of jazz music, young professionals gatherings, and wheels of brie. But that may be too little, too late. The true challenge is to develop programming relevant to all ages, especially teenagers, so that we always provide for our audiences, and we never have to "win them back." And docents, who are at the vanguard of this effort, can lead the way.

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